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Lithuania—A Case for Compromise

In the summer of 1940, after a mock referendum, Lithuania (as well as the other Baltic countries) was incorporated into the Soviet Union. It so happens that I was in Kaunas at the time, with my parents, and I still remember Soviet soldiers going from door to door making sure that the vote proceed with all the requisite speed and "spontaneous enthusiasm."

The events of that summer alone would suffice to establish Lithuania's moral and historical claim against the U.S.S.R. But the case does not rest only on forcible annexation (though the same applies to other ethnic groups seeking to secede from the U.S.S.R. as well). It rests on a record of brutal repressions and deportations, on economic policies that have nearly ruined the country's agriculture, contaminated its air and damaged the health of its citizens, on Moscow's imposition of ideological controls in every area of public life. Finally, the right to self-determination is sanctioned by international law and by the Soviet constitution itself.

But moral and legal considerations are one thing and politics as the art of the possible another. When I arrived at the Vilnius airport on March 10, I was met by a Sajudis official who

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informed me with a mixture of triumph and trepidation that independence would be proclaimed the following day. Though Sajudis-backed candidates had won a decisive majority in the election to the Lithuanian parliament, the actual decision to announce independence, he told me, was known to only a small group of political leaders.

Why this haste and secrecy? Because, he said (and others later repeated), it was necessary to present Mikhail Gorbachev with a *fait accompli* before he assumed his new presidential powers and also because a *fait accompli* would impel the West to recognize the new Lithuanian government.

This reasoning struck me then and still strikes me today as remarkably naive and in fact inconsistent with earlier pronouncements. On Feb. 15, the pro-Sajudis English-language paper *The Lithuanian Review* (Vilnius)

published interviews with leading Sajudis officials, nearly all of whom urged caution and the holding of a referendum on independence.

Even President Vytautas Landsbergis was in favor of "an agreement with the Soviet Union on the stages by which relations between two equal states would be restored without a sudden shock to either side." Two weeks later the same newspaper carried the text of a document prepared by a Lithuanian parliamentary commission, which made it clear that the country's economy would be gravely damaged unless the government worked out all the preparations—including "an agreement on economic cooperation with the U.S.S.R."—before proclaiming independence.

On March 11, however, caution was thrown to the winds. The following evening, a prominent Lithuanian philosopher and member of Sajudis, Arvydas Sliogeris, told me that he and

his colleagues at the university were "appalled" by the way independence was proclaimed and in general by the "lack of pragmatism, proclivity for bombast and excessive reliance on outside forces" on the part of the country's leaders.

He might have also added another criticism—namely, an unfortunate lack of sensitivity about the feelings of the republic's largest non-Lithuanian groups, the Russians and Poles, who make up about 18 percent of the total population. Their grievances—which I had a chance to listen to—are often inflated and even groundless. But the intense nationalism now sweeping Lithuania, as well as specific measures such as the law that Lithuanian will become the official state language in two years, lends credence to their complaints.

Gorbachev's contribution to the present crisis is grievous. He had displayed an extraordinary obtuseness in failing to recognize the magnitude, intensity and justice of ethnic aspirations in the Soviet Union. By refusing to take them seriously, he fueled nationalist resentment, alienated many of his erstwhile supporters and left the arena open to the machinations of right-wing apparatchiki.

And in recent weeks, he has countenanced a stridently tendentious media campaign against Lithuania.

Although he recognized the constitutional provision for secession, Gorbachev refused to discuss how it could be achieved. It was only by January of this year, when he visited Lithuania, that he assured his hosts that he was prepared to accept full independence provided they waited for the proper legislation to be enacted by the Soviet parliament. By that time, most Lithuanians were no longer inclined to trust him.

Both sides, then, have let the situation deteriorate and have boxed themselves into a corner: the Lithuanians by rushing independence, Gorbachev by demanding the repeal of the proclamation as a sine qua non for any "dialogue." By the same token, however, both sides have a desperate stake in reaching an accord.

Whatever Gorbachev's blunders, he cannot possibly acquiesce in an action that defies the Soviet constitution and sets a mind-boggling precedent for similar challenges in the future. Nor can the Lithuanian government simply annul a document on which it had staked its political survival. On the one hand, Gorbachev has

initiated legal steps that could pave the way to secession. On the other, the Lithuanians are right in raising objections to the current draft of the secession law. Yet recent experience has shown that Soviet laws can be drastically revised. And so can this one too.

In pursuing his policy, Gorbachev has thus far been helped by the fact even his left-wing opponents have not taken kindly to Lithuania's precipitous tactics. If he goes on raising the ante, however, he risks losing their support too: already a recent issue of Moscow News has strongly criticized the actions of the Soviet troops in Lithuania.

Though the current impasse is fraught with danger, practical considerations dictate moderation and compromise. Perhaps Moscow's recent suggestion for a moratorium on the declaration of independence is a step in the right direction. And perhaps the resolution of the crisis, if and when it comes, will prove a salutary lesson both for Gorbachev and for those who must negotiate with him.

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